

SUCCESS STORY: Creative Action Wish Trees Project



COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

This is the eighth in a series of success stories detailing innovations by arts education organizations in response to pandemic-related closures and modifications.

About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation’s hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts integration across the education spectrum and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

In 2021, AEP added a fifth priority area to success stories to capture innovations by partners and affiliates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the work of Creative Action and aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership staff interviewed [Creative Action’s](#) Natalie Goodnow, director of school-based programs, and Lynn Hoare, senior director of school-based programs, about the organization’s [Wish Trees Project](#). Creative Action is affiliated with [MINDPOP](#), an AEP partner organization.

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Interview

Please describe the Wish Trees Project.

In March 2020, people immediately scrambled to shift everything they did — work, school, worship, social gatherings, arts practice and more — to online platforms. Many wondered how to best translate their practices to these platforms. Creative Action, a community arts education organization in Austin, Texas, realized that online arts learning was inaccessible to many in the communities they served and was not a great fit for their immersive, interactive school-based theatre programming. Creative Action’s school-based programs department asked themselves: What can we do with our skills and passions that would be relevant, widely accessible and not limited to online/virtual platforms?

A wish tree is an actual tree or representation on which people hang or tie an offering to share a wish. People make wish trees around the world, and [one of the most well-known recent wish tree projects](#) in the U.S. is by Yoko Ono. Creative Action invited schools to work with us to bring wish trees to their campus. We had 18 schools participate, reaching over 8,000 students. Each school had a campus lead who served as the main point of contact with the community and coordinated with the Creative Action project lead. We partnered with [Tree Folks](#), another not-for-profit organization in Austin, to pick a tree at each site that wouldn’t be damaged by the activity. Then we set up supplies outdoors in waterproof containers and provided each campus lead with a stock of supplies to replenish them. We also created asynchronous video lessons for teachers and short videos for families, as well as a page on our website with a photo gallery and map of all the wish tree sites.

What were the precipitating factors that led you to do things differently?

This was a very different way of working for us because Creative Action typically does intensive, interactive work in schools. In central Texas, all schools were required to offer both a fully in-person and fully virtual option throughout the pandemic. Although almost every campus had some children on site, we decided that sending Creative Action staff into schools wasn’t safe, and most schools were highly discouraging in-person visitors. Early in the pandemic, we talked about moving our work online and adapting existing programs to Zoom. We realized that in our communities, not all children have internet access or adults available to support learning in the home. We heard from schools that they were looking for something their communities could do together outdoors. They were also interested in asynchronous opportunities because school staff members were overwhelmed with figuring out how to do in-person and online learning at the same time.

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We considered all these things, and there were also some other pieces that were important to us. Wishing and hoping are important to being human, especially in times of tragedy. Social justice is core to what Creative Action does, and it's important for people to hope for a better future. We wanted to make something beautiful since there was so much sadness.

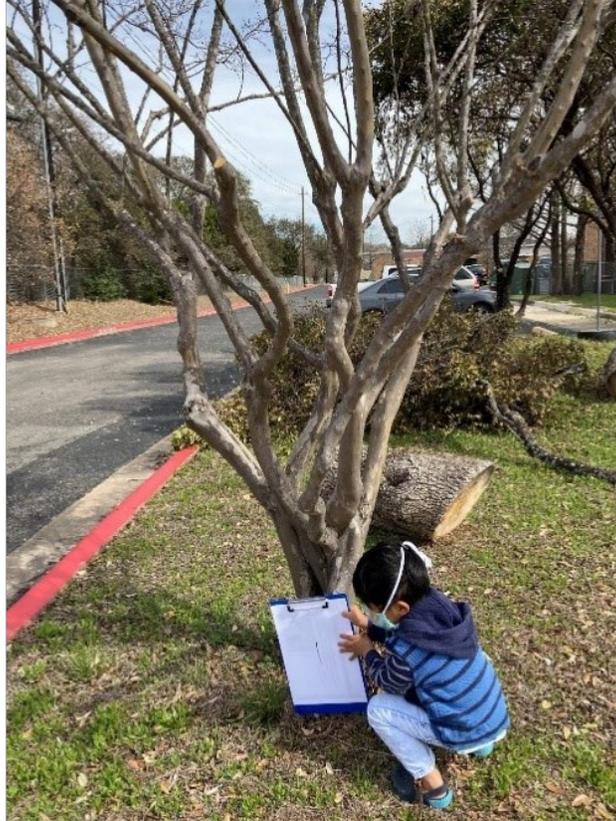
Natalie's work-life situation as a parent during the pandemic also ultimately positively impacted the success of the Wish Tree project. As Natalie related:

Personally, the impact of the pandemic on my family and my work schedule were also precipitating factors. Due to various health conditions and risk factors in my family, we decided to keep my three-year-old son at home with us while my husband and I worked from home. Limiting potential exposure to and transmission of COVID was very important to us from the beginning and even more so after losing a close family member to COVID, so from March 2020 through April 2021, we cared for our son on our own with no one outside our household within six feet of our family.

I reduced my hours at Creative Action so I could have more time to care for my son, and I was fortunate that Creative Action was willing to accommodate me working odd hours; for most of the school year, I worked from 7:00 - 9:00 a.m. before my husband's client meetings started, from noon - 2 p.m. while my son took a nap and watched some PBS, and then from 4:30 - 6:30 p.m. after my husband's client meetings ended. Since we had to lay off all our part-time teaching artist staff, many of our program leaders — including myself — found ourselves teaching again. However, given my reduced and irregular hours, I worked on asynchronous programming because I couldn't be responsive and flexible enough to accommodate schools' complex Zoom schedules.

I was glad to be able to take on a project where I was able to do much of the administration and video recording on my own schedule. Another part of the appeal of the Wish Trees Project for me was that I could do some parts along with my son. He came with me to many curbside supply pickups and to multiple school campuses where he helped me scope out trees, set up signs and drop off supplies. His wishes to see and ride on fire trucks are included on lots of Wish Trees around the city!

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Natalie's son helping with the Wish Trees Project.
Photo Credit: Natalie Goodnow

Who did you need to get involved, and were those relationships you already had or ones you had to build?

The main partners we relied on were staff from the [Creative Learning Initiative \(CLI\)](#), which exists within Austin Independent School District and also under the umbrella of MINDPOP. MINDPOP and CLI pitched an idea to schools and arts partners about a spring season of asynchronous community arts partner engagements after realizing that school staff were overwhelmed. CLI pooled resources to fund arts partners to create content. Creative Action couldn't have had such a wide reach without that partnership with CLI. Because they're in the district, they could get word out and had more tools at their disposal to connect with schools. We were able to work with new schools we hadn't worked with before. Creative Action had previous relationships with CLI and MINDPOP, but this was a deeper level of partnership.

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We also had a previous relationship with Tree Folks. A few years ago, Creative Action did a staff-wide day of action with them. We went to a park near our office to help Tree Folks conduct a tree count. For the Wish Trees Project, we leaned on their expertise when choosing sites so we didn't cause harm to trees that would serve as the center of this project.

Campus leads were extremely important to the project's success; they served as the main point of contact at each school and got the word out to the community about the project. They also coordinated supplies and checked in on the trees regularly. We initially envisioned someone in the front office serving as campus lead, but we quickly realized that the most important quality was that they were excited about the project. We ended up with campus leads who were front office staff, administrators, librarians, counselors, art teachers and classroom teachers. Outside of school staff, we invited full-time staff across different departments within Creative Action to help us check on and photograph the trees. Creative Action volunteers helped with this as well, and some were even new volunteers who had never worked with us before.

What barriers did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?

Being part of the CLI spring season was wonderful, but we were beholden to their timeline. We may have been able to get started sooner if we weren't part of that work. Then in mid-February, there was a huge snow and ice storm; Texas' infrastructure failed to the point that half of our staff lost electricity for multiple days, and the other half were worried about their friends and family with no way to get to them. Due to the storm, the bulk of the project ended up happening in the last half of the spring semester, so we were extremely short on time. Our staff members worked very hard and were exhausted by the end. We overcame the spring semester crunch time challenge not only by hustling ourselves but also by bringing in two stellar volunteers who ended up helping sort thousands of tags into packages for various campuses. That extra help was key to our success.

Another barrier was buy-in from both funders and schools. Because this was a different project for us, we had to describe it differently to secure funding. It was intentionally a simple project, and there was initial concern from schools that it was too simple. We quickly learned how to talk about it in a way that made sense to various groups.

If you could go back in time and do this again, what would you do differently (if anything)?

We wish we would have made the asynchronous lesson videos shorter and simpler and focused them on helping kids think deeply about what they wanted to wish for. We made

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30-minute videos in both English and Spanish, and the editing took a long time. In hindsight, we should have done 5-minute videos.

We would have liked to start earlier in the year and be able to close out with a live event at each site to honor what was created. Additionally, there were a couple of schools where community members struggled to fit this into their day and not be stretched thin. If we could do it again, we would build in extra supports for those communities so that the campus leads had ample time and resources to communicate with teachers and families, answer questions and make participation easier.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Throughout the project, we heard people involved in the work — CLI and MINDPOP staff, teachers, campus leads, Creative Action staff and volunteers — share that this was something their community needed, especially the beauty, hope, connection and whimsy. The wishes were sweet and silly, sad and poignant, and overwhelmingly about the pandemic.

Creative Action's school-based programs are often hidden inside classrooms and therefore not widely known outside the partnering schools, but this work was very visible. Since the trees were outdoors, everybody saw them as they drove by the schools. At every wish tree we provided a box of art supplies, hand sanitizer and a label with instructions. This enabled community members or learners at home to participate at any time that worked for them. That asynchronous aspect ended up being very important to the project's success.

You can view the video we made for families at participating schools about the Wish Trees Project, available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).